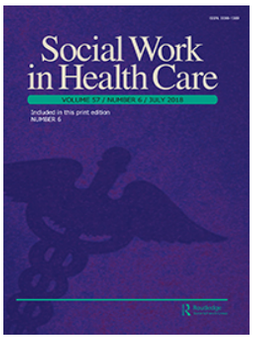

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Barriers and facilitators to housing access and maintenance in HUD-VASH: Participant and staff perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Though the U.S. Departments of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and Veterans Affairs (VA) supportive housing (HUD-VASH) program endeavors to address barriers to Veterans accessing and maintaining housing, participants report challenges that lead to program exits. This study aims to understand participants' views on the factors contributing to their exits from HUD-VASH, as well as how program staff may respond to challenges. This mixed methods study includes four sources of data: (1) surveys with Veterans, (2) semi-structured interviews with a subsample of surveyed Veterans, (3) Veterans' administrative data from VA electronic data systems, and (4) focus groups with staff from local public housing authorities and VA case management teams. Veterans reported barriers to housing access (e.g., difficult procedures, lack of communication, lack of affordable and adequate housing stock) and housing maintenance (e.g., program rules, mental health and substance use, access to resources), and staff described strategies devised, at the local level, in response to these issues (e.g., better engagement with property owners, funds for deposits and household goods, increased interagency collaboration through HUD-VASH Boot Camps). Findings can inform communities seeking to eliminate Veteran homelessness through HUD-VASH and other supported housing programs.

KEYWORDS

permanent supportive housing; homelessness; social work

Background

To address the significant population of Veterans experiencing homelessness, particularly those with a history of chronic homelessness and disabling conditions, the U.S. Departments of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and Veterans Affairs (VA) have collaborated to provide permanent supportive housing (PSH) for Veterans through the HUD-VA Supportive Housing program (HUD-VASH). As part of this program, HUD provides

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housing vouchers and VA provides supportive services to help homeless Veterans access and maintain permanent housing. PSH, generally, has demonstrated positive housing outcomes, particularly for vulnerable populations, including those with a history of housing instability, serious mental illness and substance use disorders (SUDs; Rog, 2004; Rog et al., 2014).

Given the program objective of housing Veterans and helping them sustain housing, recent work has sought to understand reasons why Veterans exit HUD-VASH and their housing outcomes post-exit. Studies suggest a combination of factors may contribute to negative program exits and possible returns to homelessness, including: justice involvement; medical conditions, such as hepatitis C and chronic pain; mental health conditions; SUDs; poor adherence to outpatient care; frequent emergency department utilization; and acute care related to mental health and substance use conditions prior to program exit (Cusack & Montgomery, 2017a; Cusack & Montgomery, 2017b; Gabrielian, Burns, Nanda, Hellemann, Kane, & Young, 2016; Montgomery, Cusack, Szymkowiak, Fargo, & O'Toole, 2017). Conversely, one study showed that use of outpatient medical care and supportive services prior to exit were protective against eviction (Montgomery et al., 2017). Recent qualitative work on the challenges faced by PSH staff identifies difficult rental markets, a lack of available funds for move-in costs, balancing time spent on housing activities with therapeutic interventions, and coordination between service providers, including VA, HUD, and community providers as barriers to successful housing outcomes (Austin et al., 2014; Cretzmeyer, Moeckli, & Liu, 2014).

This study aims to understand program participants' views on the factors contributing to their exits from HUD-VASH, as well as how program staff may respond to these challenges. The objective of this paper is to understand how program exiters may be better served by the program in order to both access and maintain housing and to inform communities seeking to eliminate Veteran homelessness through HUD-VASH and other supported housing programs.

Methods

Data for the present study are from a multi-site parent study that examined Veterans' exits from HUD-VASH (Montgomery & Cusack, 2017). Study procedures were approved by the Corporal Michael J. Crescenz VA Medical Center Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the local IRB at each study site.

Data and measures

This mixed methods study includes four sources of data: (1) surveys with Veterans, (2) semi-structured interviews with a subsample of surveyed Veterans, (3) Veterans' administrative data from VA electronic data systems,

and (4) focus groups with staff from local public housing authorities and VA case management teams.

Surveys with veterans

Research staff conducted surveys either in-person or over the telephone between April 2013 and July 2014 with a sample of Veterans who entered and subsequently exited the HUD-VASH program (N = 135). Staff at each of the four study sites constructed a randomized list of Veterans who had enrolled in and exited the program. Recruitment and enrollment strategies varied slightly by site, but research staff mailed all eligible Veterans a recruitment letter and followed up with them via telephone to arrange interviews. Veterans received $20 for their participation. Surveys collected information on factors contributing to program exits; Veterans were categorized as either non-leased exiters (n = 55) if they exited HUD-VASH prior to moving into housing or leased-up exiters (n = 80) if they exited HUD-VASH after moving into permanent housing.

Semi-structured interviews with veterans

Research staff conducted semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 30 minutes with a random subsample of 54 of the 135 Veterans who responded to the survey. Interviews elicited details about Veterans' experiences in HUD-VASH from the point of enrollment in case management through the housing search, moving into housing (if applicable), and exiting the program.

Veterans' administrative data

Research staff collected the following secondary administrative data from VA electronic medical records for Veterans who responded to the survey: sex; age; race; ethnicity; marital status; and VA Enrollment Priority Group, indicating whether Veterans received compensation related to a disability related to military service. In addition, research staff collected dates related to HUD-VASH processes from entering HUD-VASH case management to moving into housing (if applicable). (See Figure 1 for the HUD-VASH process timeline.)

Focus groups with staff

Between April and June 2014, research staff conducted eight focus groups with local public housing authority staff and seven focus groups with VA clinicians and administrators lasting approximately 60 minutes. Topics included program eligibility; application and housing processes; communication and organizational elements across agencies; and common reasons for Veterans' exits.

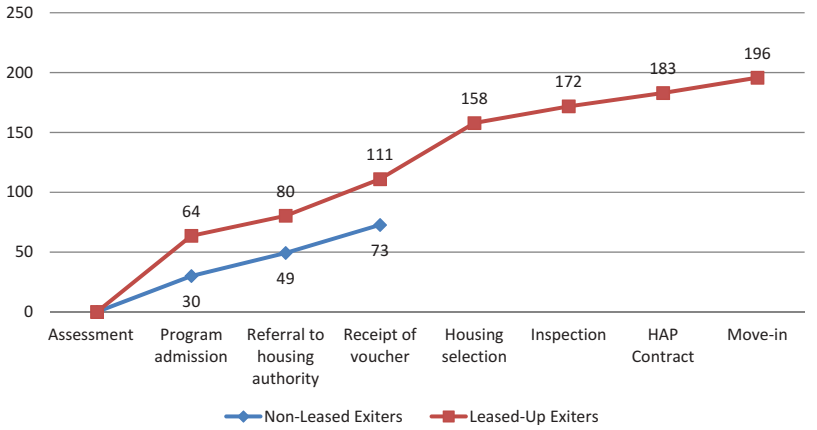

Figure 1. Days to placement in permanent housing.

Analyses

Quantitative analysis

Chi-square tests detected differences in participants' characteristics. Frequency counts of factors contributing to Veterans' exits from HUD-VASH are displayed by group; these factors, based on self-report, are not mutually exclusive and reflect all of the factors identified as playing a part in Veterans' exit from HUD-VASH. The mean time between enrollment in HUD-VASH and exit from the program, and between each stage from initial assessment through move-in, is also described for each group where applicable.

Qualitative analysis and convergence of data

Semi-structured interviews with Veterans and focus groups with staff were digitally recorded and professionally transcribed. Research staff analyzed Veterans' interview data with NVivo 10 (QSR International Pty Ltd, 2012), employing a thematic analysis approach (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2013) using themes from the interview guides as a top-level codebook; two authors independently reviewed the transcripts and identified emergent themes to iteratively expand the codebook. Coders overlapped in coding at least 10% of interviews; responses were compared and disagreements reconciled with the study team. A template analysis approach organized interviews with staff into domains relevant to the interview guide (e.g., exit reasons) (Patton, 2002). Triangulating quantitative data with qualitative results provided a deeper understanding of findings within this mixed methods study (Creswell & Clark, 2007).

Results

Characteristics of veteran sample

The majority of both non-leased and leased-up exiters were male (87.3%/91.3%, $p = .456$). Non-leased exiters were significantly younger, with nearly one in five (18.2% vs. 0.0%) younger than 35 while leased-up exiters were more likely to be older than 45 (88.8% vs. 71.0%, $p = .003$). Exiter groups differed significantly on marital status: non-leased exiters were more likely to be married (21.8% vs. 10.1%) and leased-up exiters were more likely to be divorced (44.3% vs. 25.5%, $p = .022$). In addition, nearly half of non-leased exiters (49.1% vs. 33.8%) did not have a service-connected disability while more than half of leased-up exiters were receiving at least some compensation related to a service-connected disability (57.6% vs. 47.3%) and more than one in three had a disability rating of 50% or higher (38.8% vs. 20.0%, $p = .047$). (See Table 1.) On average, non-leased exiters received HUD-VASH case management for slightly less than five months (146 days), and leased-up exiters remained in the program for more than two years (839 days, $p < .001$). The time in HUD-VASH varied by study site; the average amount of time that non-leased exiters participated in HUD-VASH case management ranged from a little over three months at one site to over six months at another (100 days vs. 182 days $p = .022$) while leased-up exiters

Table 1. Veteran sample characteristics by exit type ($N = 135$).

	Non-leased $N = 55$		Leased up $N = 80$		
	n	%	*n*	%	*p*
Male	48	87.3	73	91.3	.456
Age					.003
18–34	10	18.2	0	0.0	
35–44	6	10.9	9	11.3	
45–54	20	36.4	34	42.5	
55–64	16	29.1	32	40.0	
65 and older	3	5.5	5	6.3	
Race					.181
Black or African American	30	54.5	52	67.5	
White	24	43.6	22	28.6	
Other	1	1.8	3	3.9	
Ethnicity					.547
Hispanic or Latino	8	14.5	7	8.8	
Not Hispanic or Latino	46	83.6	72	90.0	
Marital status					.022
Married	12	21.8	8	10.1	
Widowed	3	5.5	0	0.0	
Separated	7	12.7	6	7.6	
Divorced	14	25.5	35	44.3	
Never married	19	34.5	30	38.0	
Enrollment priority group					.047
≥50% services-connected disability	11	20.0	31	38.8	
<50% service-connected disability	15	27.3	15	18.8	
No service connected disconnected, Medicaid eligible	27	49.1	27	33.8	
Other	2	3.6	7	8.8	

remained in the program from an average of a year and a half to nearly three years (523 days vs. 1,059 days, p = .010). The mean time between program assessment and each stage in the housing selection and move-in process is outlined in Figure 1. Non-leased exiters moved through the initial stages—assessment, program admission, referral to the housing authority and receipt of voucher—more quickly than their housed counterparts.

Factors contributing to exits from HUD-VASH

The most common factors that contributed to non-leased exits—that is, Veterans leaving the HUD-VASH program prior to moving into permanent housing—reflected issues related to accessing housing: dissatisfaction with apartment options (32.8%), having the voucher revoked by the housing authority (26.3%), and being unable to find an available apartment to rent with the HUD-VASH voucher (25.9%). Veterans also cited legal trouble or an offer from family or friends to move into their housing as frequent contributors to non-leased exits (22.4% each). Leased-up exiters most frequently reported an increase in income (36.7%) as contributing to their exit from HUD-VASH. The next most common contributing factors were related to maintaining housing including difficulty paying rent (24.1%) and eviction (20.3%) (See Table 2).

Table 2. Self-reported factors contributing to veterans' exits from HUD-VASH, by exit type.

	Non-leased exiter		Leased-up exiter	
Contributing factor	*n*	%	*N*	%
Apartment that was found did not pass PHA inspection	3	5.2	NA	NA
Conflict with HUD-VASH case manager or other program staff	5	8.6	9	11.4
Conflict with property owner	NA	NA	15	19.0
Conflict with neighbors	NA	NA	11	13.9
Couldn't find an available apartment to rent with the HUD-VASH voucher	15	25.9	NA	NA
Did not have money to pay for security deposit or furniture	9	15.5	NA	NA
Difficulty paying the rent	NA	NA	19	24.1
Disagreement with program rules	6	10.3	4	5.1
Dissatisfaction with apartment or apartment options	19	32.8	11	13.9
Dissatisfaction with neighborhood	NA	NA	10	12.7
Evicted from apartment	NA	NA	16	20.3
Improvement in health condition	2	3.4	7	8.9
Improvement in mental health condition	1	1.7	6	7.6
Improvement in substance abuse condition	1	1.7	5	6.3
Increase in income	6	10.3	29	36.7
Legal trouble, such as arrest, jail, warrant, probation, lawsuit or trial	13	22.4	7	8.9
Offer from family or friend to move into their housing	13	22.4	11	13.9
Voucher revoked by PHA	15	26.3	9	11.4
Worsening in medical condition	9	15.5	11	13.9
Worsening in mental health condition	8	13.8	13	16.5
Worsening in substance abuse condition	6	10.3	15	19.0

Note. Factors are not mutually exclusive.

Barriers to housing access and program responses

In-person interviews with Veterans and focus groups with staff from both HUD and VA provided further insight into the challenges some Veterans faced when attempting to access housing as well as strategies that both agencies devised, at the local level, in response to these issues. Barriers described by Veterans included difficult procedures, lack of communication, discrimination, lack of affordable and adequate housing stock, and access to resources.

Difficult procedures

Veterans described difficulty finding suitable housing that met their needs within the time allotted by the voucher as well as barriers inherent in what can be a bureaucratic process:

> When I decided to leave, I just explained to my VASH worker what had happened and I just decided that it would be best for me just to find a place on my own because that experience, I just did not want to go through that again. I just thought it was easier for me to just deal on my own as opposed to dealing with the process. I did not know that I could do it all over again or continue. So I just said that I would just leave it alone for a minute 'cause that was a pretty draining experience for me.

Staff also reported that inefficient processes for accessing housing, including program requirements that differed across local housing authorities and protracted inspection timelines, posed challenges for Veterans attempting to access permanent housing with their HUD-VASH vouchers. Over time, staff collaborated to improve procedures in creative ways. Staff at several sits described that the co-location of the housing authority and VA case managers increased collaboration to more effectively house Veterans as it enabled staff to develop closer relationships and informally discuss or troubleshoot specific Veterans' cases as needed. Staff also reported positive experiences with HUD-VASH Boot Camps—intensive all day events that promote interagency collaboration in an effort to reduce the time between homelessness and housing—that enabled them to improve program procedures and supports for Veterans (Leopold & Ho, 2015). Staff described collaborative efforts to streamline internal processes such as creating one core HUD-VASH application across housing authorities and prioritizing Veteran applicants so that HUD-VASH participants were processed ahead of other Housing Choice Voucher applicants. In addition, VA case managers began assisting with HUD applications and advising during Veterans' meetings with housing authorities to ensure Veterans' understanding of program processes and requirements while serving as a representative during these dealings. Building interagency relationships also enabled programs to be more flexible, especially in

response to program requirements that could be met in different ways to expedite Veterans' applications for housing assistance.

Despite increasing collaborative efforts, the two agencies described a tension between HUD and VA performance measures that sometimes challenged this relationship. Both HUD and VA gauge the success of HUD-VASH by the number of Veterans who lease housing through the program; however, VA performance metrics also include the number of chronically homeless and vulnerable Veterans served in the program and the amount of time it takes Veterans to move through each stage in the housing selection and move-in process. Given VA's emphasis on chronically homeless and vulnerable Veterans, many HUD-VASH participants require a great deal of support and encouragement to reach the point of leasing an apartment. To reach the outcome of one housed Veteran, VA must enroll several in case management, which greatly increases the workload of VA staff (i.e., providing case management to Veterans who do not ultimately access HUD-VASH housing), which may be untenable given the high needs of the population. Moreover, housing authorities found the chronic homelessness criterion to be a barrier since, in effect, Veterans may be told that they're not "homeless enough" to meet eligibility requirements, even though their specific circumstances would make them ideal candidates for PSH.

Other strategies that HUD and VA staff implemented to address difficulties with the housing process included one housing authority decreasing the initial voucher issuance period to encourage Veterans to locate housing more quickly. VA case managers at another site decreased the time to housing by better preparing Veterans for the housing search by offering a weekly Housing Readiness Group where Veterans received information about what their vouchers covered, how to present themselves to property owners, what to bring to meetings with property owners, and how to answer property owners' questions. Housing inspections, in particular, often delayed Veterans' access to housing; one agency addressed this by offering pre-inspected units through established property owners, while another deputized VA staff so they were able to conduct inspections rather than relying on housing authority inspectors.

Lack of communication

Veterans described difficult interactions with housing authority staff, challenges contacting VA case managers, and sometimes a simple lack of information regarding HUD-VASH. One non-leased exiter described their inability to find out what was happening with their voucher: "I was on the phone with them. The VASH chick did not know. The VASH's boss did not know. The public housing authority did not know. I found out by the time my voucher was expired—they had an answer for me."

Staff at one site described a period of mass briefings with the housing authority, where up to 50 Veterans were enrolled in HUD-VASH and provided housing vouchers at the same time. While the mass briefing was an effort to quickly house the most vulnerable Veterans experiencing homelessness, this practice had since been discontinued as it often left Veterans confused and overwhelmed and ultimately did not lead to better housing outcomes. Another site held daily VA case management huddles where case managers gathered to review and consult on cases and update all staff on recent issues should specific Veterans require more help. To keep both agencies on the same page about Veterans participating in the program, one site started a policy of a single point of contact between the housing authority and VA.

Discrimination

During in-person interviews, both non-leased and leased-up exiters reported experiencing difficulty accessing housing due to discrimination based on their backgrounds, including past evictions, poor credit, and/or a criminal history. Mental health issues and disabilities were also described as barriers to accessing housing, as one Veteran described: "People and society, they have a stigma about Veterans, especially the homeless or [ones] with mental health issues. So, the stigma is really when people are trying to get some things. People look at, 'oh, they're a disabled Veteran with health issues,' and people fear and push you away instead of helping." Despite having a HUD-VASH voucher, another participant described multiple dismissals from potential property owners: "Three places I got to putting in an application. None of them got back to me, so I got back to them. Then finally one landlord told me what time it was, 'You ain't got a job. How would you pay your rent?' And that was basically it, that 'We ain't gonna rent to you because you ain't got a job.'"

Staff echoed these sentiments, reporting difficulty identifying housing for Veterans with backgrounds that may be unappealing to some property owners as well as those with zero or very low income. They also expressed frustration with unethical property owners who tried to take advantage of HUD-VASH voucher holders by accepting rental applications and fees from Veterans who they knew they would later deny or renting sub-par housing to Veterans who had few other options. Staff recognized that Veterans who frequently experience these issues may become discouraged by the process. However, staff also described the importance of Veterans being ready for housing, which may include efforts to repair their credit or attend money management classes, which several sites incorporated into their HUD-VASH programs.

Staff further described the need to engage Veterans in an appropriate level of care regarding mental health and substance use. One site suggested

improving coordinated access to housing and specialty services and the use of assessment tools to determine Veterans' level of need prior to entering HUD-VASH so that staff could be more responsive to each individual Veteran, linking them to the most appropriate services and housing intervention. As one Veteran, a non-leased exiter with high needs that were not necessarily addressed by the program, said: "I was feeding my addiction and I didn't come back for about two months. I fell off the grid. I just went on with my addiction for a while—drinking. I lost contact with everybody."

Lack of affordable and adequate housing stock

Veterans often described having difficulty finding a housing unit that they could afford in a decent neighborhood. Staff cited an extreme lack of affordable housing at several sites, confirming Veterans' concerns about the location of affordable units. Some sites hosted housing fairs and events to recruit property owners willing to rent to Veterans with HUD-VASH vouchers, and one attempted to retain support from property owners who housed HUD-VASH Veterans previously and encouraged Veterans to consider their units. Another suggested that a certification system be available for property owners who consistently meet inspection guidelines and follow program rules, which could potentially make the housing selection process quicker and increase the number of housing units available to HUD-VASH Veterans by encouraging property owners to rent to participants. One site won a HUD grant that enabled them to identify opportunity areas within the housing authority's jurisdiction where the voucher rental limit increased, making locating housing in these areas easier for program participants.

Access to resources

Veterans identified a need for resources to secure housing, including transportation during the housing search and money for move-in costs, such as application fees and security deposits. While a Veteran with no income can be approved for HUD-VASH, community partners—including VA's Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) program, which provides temporary financial assistance and case management to prevent homelessness and rapidly rehouse recently homeless Veterans—are not required to provide move-in assistance. As a Veteran with zero income cannot prove that s/he can sustain regular rental payments, many organizations are unwilling to provide move-in assistance, potentially setting a household up for housing they will not be able to afford in the long-term.

One non-leased Veteran described the difficulty of identifying needed resources:

> You have people that you know post on Craigslist or different things—all those lead to nothing. And it just makes it difficult because, you have to—all these places

> are like, 'Give us this much money. We'll help you find an apartment.' And you have all these resources in society, but when it comes to a Vet trying to find those resources, those resources are just like taking advantage of Vets, and then the resource that was supposed to help Vets aren't promoting them enough, so Vets can be like, 'Okay. I want this. I want that.' You have to go and ask. Nobody is promoting. You don't see a sign at the hospital saying, 'Oh, are you homeless? Sign-up for—.' You know, you don't see those.

Though staff described some resources available for transportation and household assistance, they also reported the need for additional resources.

Barriers to housing maintenance and program responses

During qualitative interviews, leased-up exiters discussed factors that impacted their experience in the HUD-VASH program generally and their ability to maintain housing specifically. Staff described challenges that some Veterans faced once housed and strategies to facilitate housing stability. Barriers described by Veterans fell into the following categories: program rules, supportive services, mental health and substance use, motivation, and access to resources.

Program rules

Once housed, some Veterans felt constrained by program rules, such as regular participation in VA case management or HUD requirements limiting guests. Staff echoed that Veterans sometimes misunderstood program rules and requirements and had difficulty following these once they moved into housing (e.g., participating in ongoing meetings with VA case managers, adding new household members to the lease, completing annual voucher recertification). One Veteran felt that he did not have enough independence in the building where he rented a unit with his HUD-VASH voucher that also housed other HUD-VASH Veterans:

> I was ready to have company. I was ready to have visitors or whatever so that they would not be scrutinized. They get into some points they want to check people's bags coming in there or whatever. We are not in a prison. You are not going to take over my rights—check anybody's bags when they dealing with a house. That apartment is a house. They under an apartment—under their place, under their apartment. So it is not any different than any other apartments, so people do stuff they should not do. They violate a lot of our rights.

Additionally, one site described reductions in the amount of rent that the voucher subsidized, which Veterans indicated had an adverse impact on their ability to pay for their housing. One participant ended up being evicted when he was unable to make his rental payments due to the increase:

> It had changed so much. At one time, I owed them $4,000, because they said PHA had went up. First my rent was $38. I was paying that, paying that, paying that. I got locked up. Me and my girlfriend had a little misunderstanding and

> the cops locked me up for all of August. When I got out, I called my landlord to tell them the reason why I didn't pay the rent was because I was locked up. They told me that I owed them $4,000 because my rent had went up to $138, not $38. But I'd been paying them $38 since I got on unemployment. And I find out that PHA went up without really—when I already let them know that I wasn't working. I'm collecting unemployment, but I had no problem paying that $38 with my unemployment check, so that's what I kept doing. Now it's September and they sent me this bill from February, March, April, May, June, July, August, September, at $138. They didn't even say $100—I did pay $38, you know—but they got $138, $ 138, $138, $138, $138, and late fees, too—came to like $4,000-something.

Supportive services

One particular challenge was sustained VA case management involvement with Veterans. Frequent staff turnover led to Veterans having multiple VA case managers over time in addition to contacts at the housing authority, which served as a barrier to getting needed services. While VA staff reported a lack of communication with some Veterans over time, Veterans described how it could be difficult to trust case managers when they often changed. As one leased-up exiter described: "If I would have been able to talk to my new case manager about the decision that I made and find me somewhere to go when I left from there, it would have been extremely helpful. But we did not have a conversation like my first case manager."

Some sites used a team-based case management model to provide more specialized services and allow Veterans to form relationships with more than one individual who could assist with changing service needs over time. In addition, one housing authority included VA case managers on notices sent to Veterans to eliminate the need for Veterans to reach out for assistance and provide details and paperwork to VA case managers when they faced housing issues. However, one housing authority noted that VA case managers could be overzealous in their advocacy efforts and alienate housing authority staff who were working to follow program regulations while keeping Veterans housed.

On the other hand, Veterans also described that their relationships with program staff facilitated their success in HUD-VASH. Veterans described the support they received from VA case managers following move-in, demonstrating the value in continued service provision once housing is secured. VA case managers suggested that they may be able to identify and resolve Veterans' issues before they escalate, while Veterans reflected how good relationships with VA case managers encouraged them to seek help when needed.

Mental health and substance use

Both Veterans and staff described mental health and/or substance use conditions as barriers to maintaining housing. One site described how the transition from living on the streets to renting a housing unit is easier for

some Veterans than others, particularly as this transition requires some Veterans to learn a new way of interacting in the world that they may find challenging and stressful. Mental health issues, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), can impact Veterans' communications with staff and property owners while substance use issues may lead some Veterans to abandon their units or lose their housing if they seek inpatient treatment. One Veteran, who was evicted from housing when he failed to make additional payments when his rent increased, described frustration at the lack of assistance he received from his case manager throughout the process: "They haven't been any help at all. I feel like they should… I mean—let me keep the focus on myself. I have mental issues. I can't handle a lot of pressure. Certain things I feel they could have at least gone to the court with me or talked to Section 8 people too and explain what happened."

Staff acknowledged that some Veterans are not ready to accept the assistance that is being offered due to personal circumstances, which can also lead to non-compliance with other VA care and lack of follow-up with VA providers. As one leased-up exiter described: "They would offer groups that I could come in at 10 but because of my addiction, I procrastinated on that. My case manager would come out and talk to me. I would be—honestly would be agreeing, but not fully honest. And as a result of me not taking advantage of the support that was offered, I wound up losing it." Additionally, VA staff reported that Veterans in recovery may relapse when faced with the pressure to maintain housing.

Staff described the difficulty of providing case management to this hard-to-serve population, many of whom may not engage well with VA case managers and the community. One site that had previously worked with Veterans on housing readiness had abandoned this strategy when HUD-VASH transitioned to a Housing First approach. In response to these challenges, VA case management teams noted the importance of one-on-one meetings with Veterans as they entered the program and the need for more frequent assessments of Veterans' needs for wrap-around services. They noted this would be easier if VA case managers had smaller caseloads, but they also stressed the utility of having VA specialists, including peer support and SUD specialists, who may connect with Veterans around specific issues. Continuing education for staff on evidence-based practices, such as Motivational Interviewing, was also cited as a way to ensure Veterans received high quality services.

Motivation

Both program staff and Veterans described that, at times, Veterans' lack of motivation may lead to their not following through on housing goals. As one HUD-VASH participant described: "See, lots of Vets are, especially when you are addicts and have mental health issues, we are kind of funny. If you come

at me with, 'Here is what you need to do,' I am not even going to hear what you are saying after that." Similarly, another described feeling invalidated by program staff: "What I was just saying about that, somebody keeping their eye on you like a child making you feel like–I mean this ain't really mine. Somebody like always checking up on you and stuff like that."

On the other hand, staff from one site described how motivation is often an important quality that helps Veterans take advantage of offered services and move on from the program, while Veterans reported how HUD-VASH participation enabled them to reestablish their rental and credit histories and helped them become more independent. One leased-up exiter described moving on from HUD-VASH: "I had an eviction and that hindered me from renting from anyone and I had no income. Basically, once I started receiving income then it was a matter of not having any background rental history, so we had to start so VASH helped me get started. Now I got five years of me paying rent on my own."

Access to resources

Leased-up exiters discussed the need for additional financial or programmatic support. HUD-VASH helped some Veterans access assistance with move-in deposits, rental costs, utility bills, phone expenses, and food as well as provided furniture and other household items at move-in, yet other Veterans were unaware of the availability of additional assistance. One leased-up exiter who may have benefited from assistance when he got behind on his rent payments, eventually getting evicted for non-payment of rent, did not initially seek assistance from his case manager. By the time VA staff got involved, it was too late: "[My case manager] did try to make a statement to the landlord about giving me ample time to catch up on my rent, to pay so much but he was like no, you have to go now. If you do not have this in your pocket I want you off the property."

Veterans and program staff reported that collaborating with community partners and connecting Veterans to wrap-around services and community resources offered an important avenue to promote Veterans' independence. Veterans described programs and social supports that fostered community connections, such as attending meetings to remain sober; anger, therapy, or money management classes; and pursuing educational or vocational opportunities. Staff likewise described the myriad groups and resources they tapped into to assist Veterans in achieving their goals. One important way to assist Veterans in maintaining their housing was to increase their incomes, which included program staff helping Veterans to prepare for and find employment and apply for VA service-connected disability and other public benefits.

Conclusions and recommendations

HUD-VASH retention rates found here were similar to those reported in other studies: on average, respondents who exited HUD-VASH prior to accessing housing remained in the program for less than five months, while respondents who leased housing stayed for about 2 years (Gabrielian et al., 2016; Lipton, Siegel, Hannigan, Samuels, & Baker, 2000; Wong, Hadley, Culhane, Poulin & Davis, 2006). Though HUD-VASH aims to address barriers to accessing and maintaining housing by providing a housing subsidy and offering supportive services, respondents reported program challenges that may lead Veterans to exit the program.

During the housing search, non-leased exiters reported being unable to find an apartment due, in part, to difficult rental markets and unsatisfactory units. As O'Connell and colleagues (2010) found, local market conditions may play a more significant role in time to housing than Veterans' characteristics; when the process to obtain housing with the voucher takes too long, Veterans may simply give up and/or seek alternatives. Non-leased respondents reported moving in with family or friends and legal trouble—possibly suggesting illicit activities aimed at procuring money for housing costs—as significant factors contributing to their exits. From the perspective of the property owners, tight rental markets may make accepting HUD-VASH participants less desirable given that their property may demand higher than fair market rent. Identifying and educating property owners, particularly in more desirable neighborhoods, could increase their participation in the program. Eliminating barriers to timely inspections and execution of HAP contracts as well as incentives for participation could create better relationships between property owners and HUD-VASH, ultimately leading to more housing opportunities for Veterans (Sterken, 2009).

Further, non-leased respondents cited a need for additional resources to assist them in accessing housing and respondents who did lease housing described how occasional difficulty paying their rent placed the permanency of their housing in jeopardy. Both Veterans and VA staff suggested that housing outcomes could be improved if additional support were available, including transportation during the housing search, funds for deposits and household goods, and resources for Veterans who may experience unforeseen financial events that impact their ability to pay rent. VA offers a number of programs that could supplement HUD-VASH; for example, the SSVF program provides grant funds to non-profit community partners to assist Veteran families transitioning to or residing in permanent housing. SSVF could be a resource for deposits or temporary assistance during financial emergencies that impact housing stability. VA case managers could also help Veterans access VA and other public income benefits as well as employment

resources, including VA's Homeless Veteran Supported Employment Program, Compensated Work Therapy Program, and Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program, as well as the U.S. Department of Labor's Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program (Heitzman, 2015; Riley et al., 2014; VA, 2017; U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, 2015). Leased-up exiters indicated that an increase in income was the most common factor contributing to exits; in this way, HUD-VASH housing vouchers can be seen as "transitional support to more independent circumstances" (O'Connell et al., 2010, p. 315).

In addition to connecting Veterans to wrap-around services and community resources, program staff from both HUD and VA stressed the importance of engaging and fostering interagency collaboration and provided examples of how collaborative efforts have led to more flexible program requirements (e.g., 110 percent fair market rent in opportunity areas) and streamlined processes (e.g., application checklists) that have improved their ability to serve Veterans. Cretzmeyer and colleagues (2014) found that, though institutional barriers may be resistant to change, individual actors within these institutions "often transcended the impediments of institutional cultures and practices" (p.710). HUD-VASH Boot Camps could serve as a stepping stone to supporting individual efforts and strengthening interagency communication and collaboration which could facilitate Veteran connections to VA and community resources.

Finally, our findings demonstrate that the relationships between Veterans and VA case managers play a key role in the success of HUD-VASH participants. Under the best circumstances, VA case managers are able to identify when Veterans are experiencing issues, advocate on their behalf, and assist them in meeting their goals and attaining independence. Research on the therapeutic relationship demonstrates improved outcomes for participants along multiple dimensions, including mental illness, substance use, and general life satisfaction (Chen & Ogden, 2012; Chinman, Rosenheck, & Lam, 1999, 2000; Tsai, Lapidos, Rosenheck, & Harpaz-Rotem, 2013). Veterans suggested addressing VA case managers' caseloads and frequent turnover to better support them. Other research recommends evaluating Veterans' needs early and often and adapting support services to address needs, such as lack of life skills and social isolation, which may help Veterans who suffer from mental health, substance use and motivational concerns (Stergiopoulos, Gozdzikm, O'Campo, Holtby, Jeyaratnam, & Tsemberis, 2014).

This study offers a triangulated perspective on barriers and potential facilitators to housing access and maintenance in HUD-VASH. However, only four sites were included in this research, so it may not be generalizable to other programs or community settings. Though the majority of study respondents identified as Black or African American, the possible impact of racism and/or implicit bias related to housing was not assessed nor was it a

salient theme described by qualitative respondents. Future work in this area should more purposefully capture data related to these topics to better understand their impact on housing access and outcomes (Jones, 2016; Pendall, 2000; Schwemm, 2007). Lastly, all Veteran interviews were conducted following exit and may be subject to recall bias (Coughlin, 1990). Despite these limitations, Veterans and staff offer recommendations for improvement that should be considered and studied in more detail in future research.

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